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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ARRANGED MARRIAGES MAKE A COMEBACK, BUT  
WITH A TWIST

Reftels: A) 07 Ashgabat 1387  
B) 07 Ashgabat 1400

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[1](#)2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In Turkmenistan, a traditional country where most women still marry rather than face the social stigma from remaining single, women's rights are closely linked to marriage customs. Although the pre-Soviet custom of arranged marriages has made a comeback since Turkmenistan received its independence, most such marriages now involve the consent of both the groom and the bride. While family and social pressure to go through with an arranged marriage can be intense, Turkmenistan's law -- and families' wish to avoid potentially shameful suicide -- help ensure that most women are no longer forced into unwelcome marriages. All this does not ensure the subsequent success of a marriage, but it does give most women a voice in choosing who they marry. END SUMMARY.

ARRANGED MARRIAGES CONTINUE TRADITIONS

[1](#)3. (U) Among Turkmen, the sense of family runs deep, and one's sense of duty to one's family influences almost all aspects of an individual's life, including marriage. In Turkmenistan's culture, arranging a marriage comprises more than just making a match for two individuals. Instead, it becomes the selection process for a new member of the household, as the bride, in a symbolic and literal sense, leaves her own family to become a member of her new husband's extended family.

[1](#)4. (U) In the old days, before Soviet influences had begun to break down the Turkmen's traditional nomadic lifestyle, marriages were arranged within family clans and inside of a single tribe. Often, the engagement of the young couple would take place at an early age in order to avoid giving the children a chance to protest -- and to allow the family unit to take advantage early on of the economic benefits, including the shares of land and water granted by village authorities to the new household. Another common practice was to arrange for younger sons to marry their older brothers' widows to ensure that family units remained intact.

EDUCATION AND ENTITLEMENTS UNDER SOVIETS CHANGED THINKING

¶5. (U) With the introduction of the mandatory 10 years of education for all children under the Soviets, the old ways began to break down, and Turkmen women began to be less bound by tradition. Instead, encouraged by a Soviet policy supporting "Komsomol marriages" (love marriages) -- and enabled by state guarantees of jobs, housing and social benefits -- women started choosing their own marital partners, rather than relying on their parents, matchmakers and relatives. But even in Soviet era, the tradition of arranged marriages continued to be practiced in Turkmenistan's rural areas.

#### ARRANGED MARRIAGES INCREASE IN FACE OF NEW TRADITIONALISM

¶6. (SBU) Since Turkmenistan's independence in 1991, there has been a resurgence of traditionalism, which has been, in part, deliberately cultivated by former President Niyazov's effort to strengthen Turkmen culture. These changes have also been propelled by economic necessity, as unemployment and the cost of living have increased, and housing prices have soared. In such an environment, many are forced to live with their parents, placing them once again in a more traditional environment where they remain dependent on the extended family unit.

#### CHILDREN MAINTAIN A SAY IN WHO THEY MARRY

¶7. (SBU) Because Turkmen consider marriage a social contract, which imposes certain obligations on both spouses to contribute to the family's well-being, Turkmen approach the choice of a future spouse with a certain responsibility for ensuring that the marriage will be strong and stable. As a result, both sets of parents will discuss whether the two children are compatible. If they agree there are possibilities, they allow the children to meet each other briefly

ASHGABAT 00000005 002 OF 003

and decide for themselves whether they want to proceed with the marriage. In identifying potential couples, rural families pay most attention to physical strength and a strong work ethic, while urban families stress reputation and education. Families also try to marry within the same socio-economic circles to capitalize on a shared sense of values and morality.

¶8. (SBU) In the larger metropolitan areas, at least, the daughters are not forced to marry. In one family, the parents reportedly relented after seeing their daughter cry for three weeks after the marriage was proposed. However, family pressure can act as a strong incentive, especially in villages, against opposing all but the least desirable matches. Likewise, women approaching 25 -- the upper bracket of what is considered to be a marriageable age -- face increased pressure to compromise, lest they bring social stigma upon themselves and their families by not marrying. And in cases of pre-marital pregnancy, the pressure to marry is especially strong. Although Turkmenistan's law protects the rights of both parties to reject marriage, most cases where one or both parties oppose a proposed marriage are worked out within the extended family using mediation by family elders, rather than calling on judicial mechanisms.

¶9. (SBU) Occasionally, family pressure to marry can lead to suicide. In one recent case, a would-be bride immolated herself, rather than go ahead with a marriage. However, most families -- faced with the prospect of suicide, which is considered especially shameful in the Turkmen culture because it keeps the deceased's soul from being blessed by God -- are likely to back off before the situation reaches that point.

#### "BRIDE KIDNAPPING"

¶10. (SBU) The other side of the coin of the arranged marriage -- the "bride kidnapping" -- is also facing a comeback. An elopement arranged consensually between two young people, the "bride kidnapping" is a way of forcing the issue when a couple is in love, the groom cannot afford a bride price, or the parents of one of the young people oppose the marriage because the other party is from an unacceptable tribe or socio-economic background. In such cases, the parents of the bride and groom are virtually forced to consent to

the marriage after the fact, or face social censure because their children engaged in pre-marital relations. Unless the bride is under the legal marriage age of 16, bride kidnappers are rarely prosecuted because of a traditional reluctance to bring such cases into the public realm.

#### BRIDE PRICE ALSO MAKES A COMEBACK

¶11. (SBU) The "bride price" -- a fee of \$2000-\$5000 paid by the groom's family to the parents of the bride in recognition of their role in nurturing their daughter -- is an essential element of the arranged marriage. Although the practice of giving a bride price was illegal during the Soviet era, it has been virtually institutionalized in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. The parents are responsible for negotiating the arranged marriage and also assume responsibility for negotiating the bride price. The price can vary widely, based on the bride's appearance, reputation, skills (a good education typically counts against a bride, since she is considered to be more independent and a less-skilled homemaker) and her family background.

¶12. (SBU) Bride prices are typically substantially lower in love marriages, and they are most often negotiated by the sons. In many cases, the son only tenders up a token payment -- maybe a piece of jewelry -- to the bride's mother, and pays for the bride's wedding clothes, jewelry and other expenses. In cases of "bride kidnapping," the prices are lowest, since the consent of the bride's parents after the fact to the marriage considerably lowers the negotiating power of the bride's family.

#### NEW OPENNESS TO MARRIAGE WITH FOREIGNERS

¶13. (U) Traditionally, Turkmen males were allowed to marry females

ASHGABAT 00000005 003 OF 003

with different religious beliefs because children born in such marriages received the religion of their father. This provision was widely practiced by Turkmen Bolshevik leaders, who married Russian females because of their higher education level. By comparison, however, even during the Soviet era, Turkmen females were allowed to marry only Turkmen males. As Turkmenistan has opened up to the outside world, even this practice is beginning to disappear. Many young Turkmen females marry foreigners of Turkish and European origin. Such marriages often happen with the consent of a girl's parents, who view such a marriage as a good choice for a better future for their daughter.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT: Just as in any other country in the world, it is impossible to ensure that all marriages turn out happily, and some experts claim that spouse abuse remains a serious problem here. With most Turkmen women choosing to marry rather than to endure the social stigma from remaining single, women's ability to choose who they marry is closely linked to women's rights. A recent law on women's rights (reftels) was passed guaranteeing women's say-so regarding a marriage partner. After millennia of arranged marriages and 70 years of "love matches," modern Turkmen society is finding something in between suits the need to balance choice, family, responsibility, security, and tradition.

HOAGLAND